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NATIONAL COMMITTEE AGAINST MENTAL ILLNESS, INC.

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April 19, 1962

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Editor
Letters to the Editor Page
The Washington Post
1515 L Street, N.W.
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

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Your editorial "Money to Burn" in the Washington Post of April 19th really burns me up.

Your main charge is that the Congress over the years has voted the National Institutes of Health far more than they could properly use. The exact contrary is true. The record shows that at the end of each fiscal year in which Congress appropriated monies in excess of the Administration budget, there was always a sizable backlog of scientifically approved research and training projects which could not be supported because of lack of funds.

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Each research and training request which comes into Bethesda goes through the most rigorous type of screening by one of the 42 study sections composed of hundreds of distinguished non-governmental scientists. If it survives this rigorous process, it then goes to one of the eight Advisory Councils to the NIH for further screening. It is important to note that the present rate of rejection of research grants alone denies support to more than half of all applications submitted to Bethesda.

I sit as a member of the Advisory Council to the National Institute of Mental Health. It has been my unhappy experience this year to join my other 13 colleagues on that Council in turning down millions of dollars in research and training applications which had already been approved after the most rigorous screening by professional study sections.

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Let me give you one of a number of examples I could choose. Because of the critical shortage of psychiatrists in this country - the state mental hospitals have only 60% of the psychiatrists needed to meet even minimum American Psychiatric Association standards - the Congress four years ago, despite Administration opposition, inaugurated a program to train highly-qualified general practitioners in a three-year residency leading to full certification as psychiatrists.

This year, because of Secretary Ribicoff's cut of \$60 million last November in the over-all budget of the National Institutes of Health, and because of an inadequate amount for the general practitioner training program in the Executive budget, we were forced to turn down more than 100 general practitioners who wanted to become psychiatrists and had survived a screening process which rejected nine out of ten applications.

On April 6th of this year, letters went out to training institutions throughout the country telling them that although their applications had survived the various rigorous screening procedures, the Institute could not support the applicants because "we do not have the funds to make the recommended award."

In the State of Iowa, for example, eight of nine scientifically approved general practitioner training grants were turned down. In a number of these cases, the general practitioners had sold their homes and sold their practices because they had been told they were among the chosen 10% who were scientifically qualified to receive support.

You talk about money to burn! This rejection has burned up many people in Iowa and I suggest you check the impact of this cut with Senator Bourke Hickenlooper, who is a jealous and conscientious guardian of the public tax dollar.

In your editorial, you point out that "the number of qualified researchers puts limits to the quantity of research that can be efficiently undertaken at one time." But how do you get more researchers? You get them by supporting, with adequate appropriations, the faculties needed to train them and the stipends needed to support them.

In the field of mental health alone, where we desperately need more research workers, we were forced to turn down this year more than \$1 million in approved research fellowship applications because the Executive budget did not provide the money to support them. And I might point out: A psychiatrist who has received his M.D. degree, completed his internship, completed a three-year residency, and usually acquired a family and debts in the process, is offered \$5,500 the first year as a research fellow.

Is this money to burn?

There was no reporter present from the Washington Post when Dr. James Shannon, Director of the National Institutes of Health, and his associates appeared the week of April 9th to testify before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor-H.E.W. In that hearing Dr. Shannon declared flatly that the "best professional judgment of the Institutes" was that they could use \$953.2 million in the coming year in support of their various research and training programs. This compares with the \$780 million recommended by the Administration for the coming year, and \$840 million appropriated by the House. I want to emphasize that this testimony was given by doctors generally criticized by the Congress for their conservatism in seeking funds.

No reporter from the Washington Post was present the following week when some of the most distinguished medical scientists in the country appeared before the same committee, at their own expense, to testify as to what the scientific community needed to continue its fight during the coming year against the dread diseases of our time. The printed yearlings are not yet available, but having attended both days of the hearings, I can assure you that practically every scientific witness pointed to large backlogs in research and training applications which could not be paid because of the Ribicoff cut and the inadequate Administration budget.

I take serious fault with your seeming refusal to get the facts before you shoot. On November 22nd, of last year, a few weeks after Secretary Ribicoff had cut \$60 million from the budget of the National Institutes of Health, you remarked editorially that "even the most enthusiastic supporters of the NIH must concede that they have money pouring out of their ears and can accomodate even a large reduction without difficulty."

There is not one iota of truth in this wild generalization. Appearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee in February of this year, Secretary Ribicoff admitted that \$45 million of the \$60 million he had cut "could have been expended". His Budget Officer, Mr. James Kelly, admitted that the cut would mean that \$18 million in approved research grants could not be paid, \$8 million in approved training grants could not be paid and that many other programs would be similarly affected. Dr. Shannon told the same committee that he could only spare at the most \$15 million out of the \$738 million appropriated by the Congress in fiscal 1962 and this was because this sum could not be immediately spent, but probably would be spent by the close of the year, as new programs developed.

Under further questioning, Secretary Ribicoff and Mr. Kelly admitted that at the very time the cuts were instituted bringing the budget down to \$678 million, they had cleared a budget for the coming year of \$780 million. This naturally caused some lifted eyebrows in the House Appropriations Committee and Chairman John Fogarty summarized the feeling of the committee in these words:

"This is a real puzzle to me, Mr. Secretary. Here you are recommending increased appropriations under existing legislation and also recommending new legislation to further increase authorization for appropriations in the very areas where you are refusing to spend the money you have available this year."

All of this material is accessible to your reportorial staff. And if this material had been studied, I am absolutely confident that you would not have published the editorial in question. On Sunday, April 8th, you published a very moving article by Senator Maurine Neuberger, a victim of cancer herself. She pointed out that her late husband, a trained journalist and a victim of cancer himself, had spent hours upon hours visiting the National Institutes of Health and listening to voluminous committee testimony before becoming a convert to the cause of medical research.

Having been a science reporter for a number of years, and a political reporter before that, I know that editorial writers, almost by job definition, are hermetically sealed from the vulgar course of life. However, I would respectfully suggest that the author of the editorial under discussion go to Pershing Square, just a block from the National Press Club, and visit the "Man Against Cancer" exhibit of the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute.

He would learn that in 1900, 3,500 years after the original discovery and identification of cancer, 19 out of every 20 Americans afflicted with this disease died. In 1937, when the National Cancer Institute was created by an act of Congress, only one in seven Americans were saved. Today, according to the American Cancer Society, one in every three Americans afflicted by cancer is saved and this could be raised to one in every two if the American people would submit themselves to routine detection examinations.

In this year of Our Lord 1962, there are 1,100,000 Americans who are alive five or more years after having had cancer. What price do we put on the lives of these people? The National Cancer Institute has been almost totally responsible for these major advances. Has it been burning money these last 25 years?

In the field of heart disease, as pointed out in lengthy testimony before both House and Senate Committees, there has been more progress in the past decade alone than in all the years of recorded history. Heart disease is no longer viewed as a sentence of death. In this span of less than ten years, the prognosis in most forms of congenital heart disease has been converted from "hopeless" to "surgically curable". Hypertension, which afflicts several million Americans, used to be regarded as irreversible. Today with new drugs at our disposal, we have had a 30% reduction in deaths from hypertension and the majority of victims of hypertension are now able to work, earn a living and pay taxes. Have we burned money in this area?

In testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee just this week, Dr. Michael E. DeBakey of Houston, who flew all night from San Francisco to appear before the committee, presented the case of Dr. Arthur L. Miller, a distinguished Nebraskan Congressman who served in the House of Representatives for 16 years. A little over two years ago, Dr. Miller became increasingly disabled by the onset of occluding lesions in various parts of his body. He went to Houston to be examined and Dr. DeBakey diagnosed heavy occlusive materials in both arteries leading from his neck to his brain. Dr. Miller was operated on and two years later he is in the best of health. He appeared before the Senate Appropriations Committee and said:

"If it were not for Dr. DeBakey I would not be before this committee today. I would be dead."

What price the life of Dr. Arthur Miller? Have we burned money through the National Heart Institute in supporting a majority of Dr. DeBakey's investigations?

There is much talk of the rapid expansion of medical research over the past 15 years. I agree that this expansion has accelerated, but may I point out that federal support for medical research was practically non-existent 15 years ago. We started out from zero and we have a great deal of catching up to do.

As a jealous conservator of the tax dollar, you don't seem very concerned about the astronomic appropriations for the civilian and military space agencies. In 1959, the Congress appropriated \$485 million for a new agency - the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. For the coming year the Administration is asking approximately \$5 billion for various outer space activities. I have not seen your editorial page emit any cries of warning about the burning of American dollars in the uncongenial atmosphere of outer space.

On page One of the same April 19th issue of the Washington Post, you report that the House of Representatives passed a record peace time military appropriation bill of \$47.8 billion by a vote of 388 to 0. This is \$1,344,000,000 more than was voted for the current year. Included in this bill is a 50% increase in army chemical and biologic warfare research, including greater emphasis on "incapacitating agents." Who will be burned up with this money? - just people?

In the same bill is included \$5.5 billion for military research and development, a billion dollars more than this year. Have you studied this increase of \$1 billion with your anti-burning editorial microscope?

By comparison with these figures, we are in the minor leagues in the field of medical research. Medical research support is not only far less than 1% of total federal appropriations, but is a small segment indeed of the more than \$10 billion which the federal government will spend during the coming year for research of all types.

We have a great deal of unfinished business in the field of medical research. In a series which Nate Haseltine did for your paper only three years ago, it was pointed out that the incidence of cancer had doubled over the past generation, and that six major types of cancer showed alarming increases. I wish your editorial writer would read his own paper occasionally.

The mortality from heart disease has also increased sharply in the past generation, and it was Dr. Paul Dudley White, the noted cardiologist who treated President Eisenhower when he fell victim to that disease, who told a Senate Appropriations Committee several years ago that the alarming increase in heart disease in America made this "one of the unhealthiest countries in the world."

It is ironic that you should entitle your editorial "Money to Burn", because no investment has reaped greater economic dividends than medical research.

As Vice President Johnson pointed out on the floor of the Senate in 1959, close to two million lives have been saved due to medical research since the close of World War II. These people saved from death between 1945 and 1958 earned approximately \$3,600,000,000 in income in 1958 alone. On this income, these people paid to the federal government in income, estate, gift and excise taxes \$623 million in 1958, more than three times that year's federal investment in medical research.

In his Special Health Message to the Congress last year, President Kennedy said:

"The next 10 years will require a vast expansion of this Nation's present total effort in medical research if knowledge is to keep pace with human progress.

"As long as people are stricken by disease which we have the ability to prevent, as long as people are chained by a disability which can be reversed, as long as needless death takes its toll, then American health will be unfinished business."

In sum, I submit that your editorial is not based upon easily accessible facts. You have not covered the hearings and you are therefor guilty, regrettably, of an atypical case of Know-nothingism.

One final point: You now join the chorus of dinosaurs who believe somehow that the expenditure of federal money is an evil thing. You also seem to suggest that it is vulgar to equate financial support with high-level medical research. You don't seem to find it difficult to equate money with the build-up of our national defense. For example, a lot of research sophistication goes into the building of a Polaris submarine, but what got Admiral Rickover and his dedicated colleagues started? Was it an editorial in the Washington Post or was it hundreds of millions of dollars appropriated by the Congress?

How do you build research laboratories and how do you support thousands of dedicated research workers, if you don't provide the money for them? In essence, an appropriation is a yardstick which we use in evaluating the relative importance of a program within the total spectrum of this democracy's needs. For example, you have waxed eloquently in a number of editorials about the need for the strengthening of the American educational system. How do you do this unless you provide a massive injection of funds to build new schools and to raise teachers salaries? Is this money to burn?

In your concluding paragraph you talk about burning money in the field of medical research as "an act of propitiation."

I would agree that the spending of money for medical research is an act of propitiation -- it is an offering up of some of the precious sinews of our democracy to the preservation and enhancement of human life.

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I wish there was some way in which you could repair the damage you have done by so ill-advised an editorial. We have the glittering precedent of U.S. Steel which saw the light of day and rescinded an unwise action. It is my sincere hope, as a devoted and affectionate reader of your fine newspaper, that you will in a short period of time achieve the wisdom of Roger Blough.

Sincerely,

Mike Gorman
Executive Director
National Committee
Against Mental Illness